

Land of the Living

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Summary: Angel reflects on his tattoo

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Land of the Living Disclaimer: All characters belong to Joss Whedon and such. We all know the drill. This story came about because of a contest on the Posting Board wanting stories concerning Angel's tattoo. Though I don't do well with other people's ideas, this is something I had considered a few times before. Being the dedicated Buffy/Angel person I am, I just knew that the origins of the tattoo had something to do with her. The question became how, and in a way, exactly why since it seems a bit out of character. As soon as I decided that, the rest was easy. After a friend of mine noted a huge glaring error in the original version of this story (Gee, thanks Lisaâ€¦ part of that was sarcasm you know. But I'm glad you found it. I really hate making an idiot out of myself.), I had to go back and fix it, so the story is slightly different from the original. But after going through it again, I think it might make the point of the story even better. Everything he is belongs to herâ€¦

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He almost stepped into their view until he heard his name. That made him pause and listen. Ok, so he shouldn't be eavesdropping, but they were talking about him. Did that count?

Oddly enough, they were sitting atop a crypt on a blanket. To him it looked as if they were making a study session out of it, seeing the stack of books between them. Or maybe a gossip session after taking note of the plate of snacks they had sitting on top of the books. The stakes sitting on the blanket let him know they were just killing time while they waited for a member of the undead to join them. He could be wrong though. For some reason the whole scene struck him as funny.

"When do you think he got it? I mean, it just seems kind of out of place for him, you know?" Willow asked as she tore off a piece of the croissant and popped it into her mouth.

"Yeah, I know. I guess I never gave much thought to where it came from or why he got it," Buffy replied, scowling slightly in thought on the subject. It wasn't that she had never thought of it, she just never came up with any good answers. She thought she knew him so well, but at times like this she wondered if perhaps she didn't really know him at all. "But you have a point, it does seem a little out of place, doesn't it?"

Willow nodded in agreement. Angel leaned against a tree, listening to them as they continued their speculation. Smiling to himself, he wondered how on earth they had gotten on the topic of his tattoo. He decided it must be that girl talk thingâ€| that 'being a normal girl' thing that Buffy talked about now and again. Slowly his smile faded as his thoughts take him back to their subject in question.

"So, you're going to go then?" Whistler asked, a slight look of amusement on his face. He had known as soon as Angel saw the girl his fate was sealed. But it was still funny to hear it from the vampire.

"Isn't that what I'm supposed to do?" came Angel's dry reply. "And how do you know she's going to be going there anyway? Some demon sixth sense or something?"

Smirking, Whistler looked at the vampire and grudgingly admitted to himself that he kinda liked him. His mind was almost as quick as his tongueâ€| when he had eaten, anyway. "For us it's a seventh sense. We just know already! There are just some things I can't explain to you. You're going to have to accept that." Watching as the vampire packed the clothes he had bought after cleaning himself up, the demon grinned slightly. "Besides, I wouldn't be having any fun if I told you everything, now would I?"

That earned him a glare as Angel humped, but he didn't make any more comments. His thoughts were jumbled and he had to wonder what was it about this girl that already made him feel so protective of her. There had to be something he was missing. He had been alone for a long time now, he felt immune to loneliness, so that couldn't be it. Maybe he was just losing his mind.

Whistler watched him closely, almost able to hear his thoughts. Approaching the vampire slowly, he placed a hand lightly on his shoulder. "You can't be dead to yourself and expect to be able to help her. You can't just decide not to feel anything."

"I've been dead for a couple of centuries, nothing can change that now." His tone was almost neutral, but Whistler detected a resigned note in it.

Dropping his hand, the demon sighed. Now he remembered why he didn't bother to be serious with this one. It didn't work. But it had to if the Slayer was to survive.

"You know what I mean. You feel dead...empty... on the inside. You've forgotten what it's like to feel anything. How long has it been since you've felt any kind of emotion? Or do you feel it and tell yourself it's not there?"

Angel turned and looked at him, picking up the suitcase he had packed. "Not long enough. I don't need emotions to help her. I just need to pay attention." He ignored the last question completely.

And with that, the vampire stepped out into the cold night and was gone, on his way to his new life. A life he needed if he were to continue to exist.

Curled up on the bed in the hotel room, he glanced at the heavily draped window and closed his eyes, trying to relax. The musty smell of the room annoyed him, the dust he could see settling in a ray of light irritated him, the chatter of other occupants of the Inn annoyed himâ€| in fact, everything was getting on his nerves right now. No matter what he did, he just couldn't seem to relax, couldn't stop the thoughts spinning around in his head. Something was pushing him to make his way to Sunnydale as fast as possible and he was consciously trying to put it off. He had given himself so many excuses over the past few days, but he knew they were just that... excuses. He didn't like the protectiveness she brought out in him, and was doing everything he could to fight it. It wasn't right. She was a slayer, he was a vampire. Do the math. It didn't work like that. Nor would he admit to himself that he was starting to feel the twinge of something more. Something he couldn't put a name to just yet. Something he was choosing to ignore.

He had been dead for so long now. Not just physically dead, but dead in so many other ways as well. Emotions meant nothing to him. He had felt nothing for so long he had almost forgotten what emotions were. But now he felt protective. He didn't like it. Not a single bit.

Touch, and all things associated with it had dulled to nothingness as well. No longer did he feel the cold, the rain, the heat, or even pain. He was just numb, inside and out. Living on the streets hadn't done anything either. Filth, hunger and the elements were things he had barely noticed. He only fed off rats to keep himself alive. He was too much of a chicken to let himself starve, though sometimes he wondered if that was the right thing to do. Could he ever make up for all the things he had done? No, he didn't think so. Could he try? Maybe.

Throwing an arm over his eyes as he groaned, he tried to block out all the thoughts swirling around in his head. Failing miserably, he tried to sleep, but sleep wouldn't have him either. Becoming restless, he rose and began to pace, careful to avoid the few rays of sun that escaped into the room from around the edges of the dark maroon drapes.

This wasn't going to be easy. He liked his almost nonexistent life as it was. No one bothered him, and he could live alone, feeling nothing. He had even become numb to the all-consuming guilt. It wasn't possible to ever forget what he was, but he had already accepted that. The only thing left for him to do was wait until he

could fade into oblivion and truly become nothing.

But now that was over and done with. Just seeing the girl once had already invoked an emotion in him that he hadn't had for well over 150 years. Had he ever really felt protective towards anyone, in either of his lives? He honestly couldn't remember any more. Right now he knew he didn't like it. And what did Whistler know anyway? Of course he could be of assistance without feeling anything for her. Hell, he didn't even have to like her to help her out, did he? Not that she didn't look likable or anything, but well, he just didn't want the hassle. Whistler didn't know shit.

Flopping back down onto the bed, he closed his eyes again, picturing the scenes he saw with the slayer and replayed them in his head. She seemed so alone. Watching her in her home, he could almost feel her separation. Her tears had ripped into him in a way he never thought possible. Watching her through the window as she cried in the bathroom, he had wanted to hold her. To comfort herâ€œ to brush away her tears gently and promise her that everything would be okay. Not only had she been handed something so big she could barely comprehend it yet, but her parentsâ€œ even he could see it coming and that was the first time he had ever seen or heard them. He knew they wouldn't last much longer. Whistler was right, she was going to have it rough.

Sighing, he looked up at the ceiling, trying to ignore the slowly waking feelings inside of him. They had been forced to sleep for so long, he almost didn't recognize them when they came.

Thinking about fate, he suddenly became angry about the fate of this poor girl. Who was fate to pick her for this?! To put her life in such a danger? What gave them the right to allow an innocent to look in the face of evil? Who were they to put the weight of the world on her shoulders? She was only a kid! Shouldn't she have a chance to be a kid? A chance to gossip, shop, studyâ€œ a chance to grow up? Fate wouldn't allow her to have any of those chances. "Dammit," he yelled at the walls, gathering the sheets in his fists.

Sadness at knowing the world wouldn't be blessed with her for very long filled him as anger fled. A Slayer's life had to be short. It was the only way. Once they hit a certain age, their abilities began to diminish. One day a vampire would catch her on a bad day and she would die. Her blood would be spilled and the world would mourn her.

Suddenly his thoughts shifted to his family and the loss of them floods into his being. The loss of never really knowing them. Of disappointing them so often. If he could do it over again, he'd try to please them this time. Try to make them understand he never meant to hurt them. Even those lectures he had hated that his parents had given to him were something to hold on to now. But it was too late in his life to make them realize what they had meant to him because they were long dead, by his hand no less, and the loss could never be replaced. Perhaps if he could have had a family of his own, he might possibly begin to make up for it, but that would never happen either. One more loss to endure. One loss among so many he knew he would face in the future.

As the emotions began to come to the surface once again, so did his awareness of the things around him. Abruptly he could feel the chill

in the room, the coarseness of the blanket under him, the dryness of the air filling his nose and lungs, and the slight breeze coming from the poorly sealed window. All of these things filled his sense of touch once again, and he closed his eyes tightly. Sensory overload began to overwhelm him.

No, he would not allow this. There were only a few emotions left for him to remember, and he didn't want to. Pressing his hands to his temples as he can feel them rise and he cried out in pain, sharply taking in air that he doesn't need. "No!"

Oh God, he thinks, how could I have done that to those people? They might not have all been innocent, but they hadn't deserved to die like that. Tears began to fall behind closed eyelids and he doesn't bother to wipe them away. He deserved to die. He should have died. The clan should have just killed him instead of cursing him. But no, they knew how to make him suffer. They knew that no one with a soul would be able to justify, even to themselves, the kinds of things he had done. No one could justify the torture he had loved to give; the pain and suffering he took so much pleasure in. He would bear the guilt for eternity, just as they had planned.

And lonelinessâ€| oh God he thought it would consume him. All the years he had pushed it back came up from the pits below to swallow him whole. He was going to drown in it. It would take what was left of his tattered soul and leave nothing behind but a shell. Crying, he sits up, dropping his head into his hands. Shoving back at the loneliness that threatens to consume him, he is completely unprepared for the next thing that fills him.

Oh no, this will not go down in such a way. He won't allow it. But once again the image of the Slayer fills his mind and the love he feels for her takes him off the bed and onto his knees. In only a few short minutes, she had managed to break down every wall and barrier he had built around himself. She had found a way into this cold heart of his without ever knowing it. Curling up, he held his knees to his chest and began to rock as all the emotions he's ever had come to the surface, playing havoc with his mind and soul.

Slowly the tears dry and the emotions settle, still there but no longer running rampant. Rising gingerly, Angel looks around the room and realizes that for the first time since he has been cursed, he feels alive again. He feels aliveâ€| no longer numb to everything around himâ€| or to himself. As he wiped the tears from his cheeks with the back of a hand, the fact that his clothes don't match sinks into his mind and he laughed hoarsely. He wondered how many days he'd been dressing like thisâ€| he could rival Whistler's wardrobe at this rateâ€| but at least the demon didn't put clothes together this badly. Sinking back down to the edge of the bed as he dropped his hand back to his side, his mind processed everything at once. He understood now.

This was cause to mark itâ€| and his mind raced through the ways he could do so. He would do it in a way he had done before, a way to mark a passage. The method decided, he lay back down on the bed to wait for the night to fall. She might never know it was for her, but she would see itâ€| even if he never would. He never saw the other one either, but he always knew it was there.

Feeling the needles penetrate his back, he smiled at the pain, reveled in it. It had been so long since he had felt pain so even though it did sting, he enjoyed it. When the buzzing stopped and the needles were lifted, he looked over his shoulder at the artist.

"How does it look?" he asked, wishing for once he could see it in a mirror. Wishing he could make sure the other hateful mark was gone for good.

"Looks good, man," the artist replied, picking up a mirror, "Wanna look? Can't see a bit of your other one. I hope that's the way you wanted it."

Rising quickly, Angel grabbed his shirt from the table and slipped it over his head. Avoiding getting in front of the mirror, he shook his head, pulling out some bills to pay for it. "Nah, I'll look at it after the redness goes away. Always looks better thenâ€| At least the other one did. And yeah, I wanted the other one gone. Bad memories you know?"

The artist nodded and grinned, happily taking the money from the odd customer. Most of his customers wanted to see the work before paying for it, but he wouldn't mention that to this guy. Money was money and if the dude didn't want to make sure it wasn't messed up, then who was he to complain?

"Musta been a chick, right man?" he asked, not really expecting an answer. "Chicks are bad news. They only get you in trouble."

Stepping out into the night, he pulled air into his lungs and smiled faintly. It was time to go wait for the Slayer. He had work to do if he intended to be of any use to her. Heading down the street, he stops, pausing to look into a jewelry store window. Spotting the silver cross, he knew as soon as he saw itâ€| Both things gained tonight would be for her. Two things gained, and one thing erased.

Looking around the empty apartment, he knew this was the place. He would wait here for her, and she would be here soon enough. Opening the small black box in his hand, he looked down at the cross and ignored the feeling of dread it instilled in him. Lightly touching a finger to it, he blocked out the searing pain, his thoughts on her. Closing it again, he looked around one last time, then walked out, closing the door behind him. It was time to start making a life here.

"So, when do you think he got it?" Willow asked again, stuffing more of their snacks into her mouth. "And do you think the A really stands for Angel?"

Buffy looked thoughtful as she reached for some fruit, giving some serious thought to the topic. "Well, it's still pretty new. I mean it doesn't seem to be faded or smudged any. And muscle movement will

spread the ink out, so I'd guess it wasn't that old." Willow looked at her and grinned. "And I guess it has to stand for Angel, what else would it stand for?"

"So you have thought this over," Willow said, grinning deeply. She was happy to see her friend in such high spirits. It was a good thing.

Blushing, Buffy looked at her. "Yeah, I guess I have."

Smiling to himself, Angel stepped into the light and cleared his throat. It was time to stop the girl talk before things got even more interesting. Besides, if he stood there much longer he might tell her what it really stood for.

The cat was for him. It was free. It had wings to take it where it wanted to go, but as with all felines, it was loyal to a select few. The design was simpleâ€| it was of his people. For the loss of his family and what he had done to them. The depiction as a whole was for protection. Protection from what he had been before. Protection from what he could become. Protection for the people he had loved and the person he loved now.

The A was by far the simplest of the whole design though. Aliveâ€| she had made him feel alive. That was completely for herâ€| she had brought him out of darkness. It was for her and her alone. But that was a story he wouldn't tell her aboutâ€| not for a while anyway. And the other story? He'd never tell her that. Never tell her how her mark had rid him of the mark of death, pain and evil. The thorn, both on his flesh and in his being. The thorn that had been taken away in one place by more needles and in the other place by a soul that was a pure as he had ever seen. By a heart that already owned his.

Author's Note: The thorn is a symbol of death, evil, and the devil as a Celtic rune. For this story, it is assumed Angel gained this tattoo while travelling with Darla, perhaps by her request. When Giles refers to a tattoo in the episode "Angel", we are left with the impression that it is old. However, he never actually stated what the tattoo was of, and makes no comment when Buffy describes it wrongly. One can assume that while a Watcher noted he had a mark, no one ever got close enough to him to tell what it wasâ€| Well, no one that lived to tell about it anyway.

End
file.